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CHAPTER FIVE

The Web of Family Ties

In the social structure of Indian village communities the family occupies by far the most important place. It derives its significance not merely from its economic functions and its dominant role as an agency of socialization and social control, but its ritual importance is also very great to the average Hindu.

Classical Hinduism has prescribed four stages of life: celibacy (*brahmacharya*), family life (*grahastha ashrama*), resignation (*vanaprastha*) and renunciation (*sanyas*). In the first stage a person acquires concentration by controlling his instincts and impulses so that he may be able to dedicate himself to the pursuit of learning. This is the formative period of life, and in it a man is expected to equip himself for the proper discharge of his social responsibilities. In the second stage he enters life and begins to share his social obligations. Now he must marry and beget children. This is the creative period and covers a very considerable part of a man's life. The last two are the contemplative stages. As a preparation for the ultimate renunciation of worldly goods and worldly connections, he should first cultivate an attitude of detachment and devote himself to reflection. When this has been achieved, the time will have come for him to renounce formally all his possessions and relations. In contemporary rural India very few people can understand or explain the social philosophy that lies behind this system of *ashramas* or the 'stages of life', but its essence has reached them for countless generations through oral tradition and through the teachings of numerous saint-poets and has thus become ingrained in their thought-pattern and value-structure. Sex indulgence among children is socially disapproved in the Indian countryside. Marriage is universally regarded as

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shows signs of digesting these well, siblings and other members of the family begin giving bits of food to pacify the baby when it starts crying. During this stage people love to handle the child, and there is very considerable fondling and play. No effort is made to establish sphincter control in the child at this point. Every possible help is given to the child to learn to stand and walk. While people take great delight in imitating the sounds made by the child, efforts are also made to teach him to talk. Words for grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters are generally the first to be taught. In a state of mental agitation and worry the mother may occasionally spank the child; but this is definitely disapproved and when detected the mother is always reproached by the elders for doing so.

With some modifications this continues even during the early childhood, up to the age of about three. When the child learns to walk it is carried about less by the elders. Now and then it may be left to play by itself in the backyard or in the lane in front of the house. Help in its learning processes continues to be given, and elders indulge in considerable fondling of the child. Weaning is not attempted unless necessitated by the mother's pregnancy or by the 'drying up of her breasts'. Attempts at toilet training are made at this stage. When the child wakes up in the morning the mother seats it on the hollow made by joining her feet and keeps on making a hissing sound which is believed to induce a child to ease itself. Now and then the child is taken to a corner, the cloth covering its genital organs is removed, and the hissing sound is made to make it urinate. If the child wets or soils its clothes at this stage the mother or a sibling will say, '*Chhi*, you are dirty'. But this is done with a smile and there is hardly any reproach in the remark.

When boys are seen manipulating their organs the elders smile and playfully remove their hands from them. Boys invariably start doing so again, and are not admonished. This amuses rather than irritates the older members of the family. While the sex experience of the children is confined wholly to their manipulation of genital organs, their sex knowledge is considerably wider. Sharing the same room with their parents, they have frequent opportunities of watching them engaged in the coital act. Even at the age of three the vocabulary of several children includes the words for penis, vagina and copulation.

LIVING TOGETHER

515 Sponging children with warm water is now often replaced by two or three cold baths per week; the frequency being more among the Brahmins and Komtis and less among the Muslims and the
861 untouchables. The elders practise considerable deception in their dealings with the children. Efforts at disciplining them tend to be rather erratic; and extremes of affection and strictures are by no means uncommon. Jealousies between siblings may be induced by members of the family who take delight in watching the irritation, anger and aggressiveness of little children. Tantrums during this stage are frequent. The methods commonly employed to pacify the child are: distracting it by making funny noises, rocking it in a cradle, offering it food or milk, scolding it loudly, threatening it, and finally boxing its ears and spanking it.

855 Later childhood begins at about five and continues until the advent of adolescence. At this stage the children form their own
[857] play-groups; spending several hours of the day in their respective age-groups. Now they are free to play in the streets and the open
[866] ground outside the village. Maternal attention is now considerably reduced; the elders keep an eye on them, but apart from this they have considerable freedom. As they grow older solicitation of affectionate responses through handling, play and fondling gradu-
[863] ally diminishes. Toilet training becomes strict, and the child is expected to have full control over defecation and urination. Cleanliness is insisted upon, and any failure on his part in this respect arouses anger in the elders. The erring child is ridiculed,
[864] chastised and punished. Now they must wear clothes and begin to learn to hide their genitals. If the elders find their organs exposed they point to them and ask, '*Arre*, what is that? Why are you exhibiting that little thing?' Children often develop a sense of shame at this stage, blush at such remarks, hide their organs and
861 run away from the elders. Discipline becomes more rigorous and physical punishment is more frequent. Rewards for good behaviour include praise, partiality and favoured treatment on the part of the parents, larger share of food and small gifts of money. Punishments, on the other hand, include rebukes and threats, ridicule, threats to report the matter to the father, spanking and occasionally denial of food or playing things or even locking up in a solitary room. Considerable dishonesty is practised by elders in their dealings with children, which is often detected by the latter and angers them all the more.

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latter and angers them all the more. The play-groups cut across 857
the boundaries of family and caste and include boys and girls 867
from different castes. This necessitates the giving of instruction to
them by the elders, who explain the hierarchy of the caste system
and indicate clearly the groups among whom participation in
eating on a basis of equality is permitted. Rules of inter-dining
and untouchability are enforced at the age of six or seven;
although until the age of adolescence their breaches are not very
strictly punished. At the age of six or seven boys and girls come to
have their separate play-groups, although their occasional playing
together is not prohibited. Sex knowledge and sex experience of 864
the children widens considerably, partly through secretly watching
and imitating the elders, partly through oral instruction by older
members of the play-group. Masturbation is now stealthily prac-
tised. Elders do not take an indulgent view if they find grown-up
boys manipulating and rubbing their penes. Ridicule and threats
are often employed to cure the habit. The threats commonly given
are: 'If you persist in this habit your organ will not grow'; or that
'It will become crooked and you will be useless.' Threats of ex-
posure cause great shame among the boys. Nevertheless, know-
ledge acquired from older and more experienced members of the
age-group indicates that 'the penis grows larger by the practice of
masturbation', 'maturity is arrived at earlier' and 'boys not doing
it are not tough—they are half-girls', and consequently boys con-
tinue to masturbate secretly. A small group of boys may occasion-
ally have a session of joint masturbation. Mutual masturbation is
known, though it is less frequent. Similarly, little boys lie down 864
together and imitate the coital act, although this does not involve 838
actual anal penetration. Homosexuality is said to be confined to
young people and boys with urban contacts; but we have reason to
believe that it is practised on a limited scale by others also. How-
ever, it is confined only to pre-adolescent and adolescent groups.
A boy persuades a smaller boy to lie down with him, and just
rubs his organ at his anus—only in very rare cases is any anal
penetration effected. A popular game with the boys is to make a
female figure in dust and play at copulation. In the three instances
observed by us the imitation was perfect, and resembled normal
coitus in all its essentials. Boys and girls play at marriage, which 864
in a few cases culminates in the act of 'sleeping together'. In most
cases this is just lying together and no more; in a few it reaches the

point of rubbing genital organs. Girls masturbate either by pressing and releasing their clitoris with their fingers or by rubbing their thighs. Obscenity and talk about sex are disapproved by the elders, but the boys regard it as a mark of toughness and as an indication of their grown-up status, and as such indulge in it fairly regularly. Their vocabulary of abuse includes all the major sexual words, and they can often be heard abusing each other in terms such as: 'Copulate with your mother', 'Cohabit with your sister', 'My penis!'—or the rather curious 'Your mother's penis'.

Most children's games involve competition in the use of skills and stamina. The children are divided into several groups and factions, and these often come into conflict on account of intense jealousies and rivalries. Elaborate group *mores* and codes of ethics govern their inter-relations during states of friendship, neutrality and enmity. Toughness in boys is the admired quality; weakness, refined ways, spying and complaining coming in for criticism and ridicule. Running away from fright, crying and treachery to the group are remembered long after the quarrels and restoration of peace between conflicting factions. Outside the play-group the growing children have to lend a helping hand to their parents. Grown-up girls assist their mothers at their domestic tasks and take partial charge of their younger siblings, while boys do odd jobs for the father and other older male relatives. It is now time that they should take their first steps in preparing for adult life.

Adolescence brings about a significant change in the life of both boys and girls. By this age girls are expected to become proficient in all the major domestic tasks. Negotiations for their marriage are invariably started at this age. They grow up faster than the boys. While boys of a comparable age are still regarded as 'grown-up children who do not understand', girls come to be looked upon more or less as fully-grown women. Now they must be careful about their dress; particularly their breasts should never be exposed. They should 'not run about the village like boys', nor should they talk or laugh so loudly as to attract notice. Mothers advise them to be cautious in their behaviour, for this is the age when young people start giving attention to them. Young people have a special fascination for adolescent girls 'whose youth is just beginning to blossom'. Young men succeeding in fondling 'the unripe, half-developed breasts' of a girl and in having intercourse with one 'whose pubic hair is just beginning to grow' easily win the